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ABSTRACT

In order to examine the development of social pretend skills in the toddler period, social pretend play was observed in same and mixed age dyads. More complex social pretend play was expected in the mixed age than in the same age condition. A second purpose of the study was to compare 5-year-old children's attempts to communicate pretend meanings with same age and younger partners. It was hypothesized that 5-year-olds would modify their attempts to construct social pretend play to accommodate the perceived ability of younger children. A total of 32 children 2 and 5 years of age were observed in same age and mixed age dyads as they played with a novel toy designed to elicit fantasy play. Each dyad was observed for 15 minutes. The complexity of social pretend play was rated in each 30 second interval. Meta-communication, teaching, attempts to direct, and imitation behaviors were recorded. Complex social pretend play was more frequent in mixed age dyads than same age 2-year-old dyads. The 5-year-olds used more verbal meta-communicative behaviors in mixed age than in same age dyads. In mixed age dyads, 5-year-olds more often performed teaching behaviors and attempted to direct the play, whereas 2-year-olds more often imitated their partners. (Author/RH)

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SOCIAL PRETEND PLAY IN TWO-YEAR OLDS WITH OLDER AND SAME AGE PLAY PARTNERS

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Thanks to the children and staff of the UCLA Child Care Center that made possible our observations. Reprint requests should be addressed to Carollee Howes, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

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Social pretend play in two year olds with older and same age play partners

Abstract

In order to examine the development of social pretend skills in the toddler period social pretend play was observed in same and mixed age dyads. More complex social pretend play was expected in the mixed age than in the same age condition. A second purpose of the study was to compare five year old children's attempts to communicate pretend meanings with same age and younger partners. It was hypothesized that the five year olds would modify their attempts to construct social pretend play to accomodate to the preceived ability of the younger children. Thirty-two two and five year old children were observed in same age and mixed age dyads as they played with a novel toy designed to elicit fantasy play. Each dyad was observed for fifteen minutes. The complexity of social pretend play was rated in each 30 second interval. Meta-communication, teaching, atempts to direct, and imitation behaviors were recorded. Complex social pretend play was more frequent in mixed age dyads than same age two year old dyads. The five year olds used more verbal meta-communicative behaviors in mixed age rather than same age dyads. In mixed age dyads, five year olds more often made teaching behaviors, attempted to direct the play, and two year olds more often imitated their partners.

Introduction

Social pretend play or the integration of pretense into social play with peers begins in the toddler period and peaks at about age five (Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983). During this period children become increasingly skillful at communicating the nonliteral nature of the play and in coordinating pretend actions and meanings. Recent research has described the content and use of metacommunication to initiate and coordinate pretend play (Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984; Garvey & Berndt, 1975; Giffin, 1984; Howes, 1984), and has examined concurrent correlates of social pretend skills (Connolly & Doyle, 1984). A third area of research on social pretend play, the development of social pretend play skills, has received less research attention. The study of social pretend play between relatively experienced and relatively inexperienced partners has the potential for elicudating some of the mechanisms by which children acquire the skills of social pretend play. The primary objective of the present study was to examine the development of social pretend skills by observing the social pretend play of two year old children with same age and older partners.

Studies of toddler pretend play with parents and siblings suggest that an older partner may facilitate a young child's beginning attempts at playing pretend. The adults provide a structure and a context for children's play and thus facilitate more complex social pretend play than when the toddler plays with agemates (Miller & Garvey,1984; O'Connell & Bretherton, 1984; Sachs, 1980). Although the parent provides suggestions for pretending, the child controls the play by actively selecting which aspects of the parental guidance to incorporate into play. The parent communicates the rules of playing pretend, e.g. keeping

the partner informed; and the child constructs the pretend roles and scripts. Thus the child in adult-child pretend play does more than imitate the adult's symbolic actions; they communicate and coordinate pretense.

Dunn and Dale's (1984) study of sibling pretend play suggests that toddler's pretend play with preschool siblings both parallels and contrasts with parent-toddler parallel play. Like parents, the older siblings create the context of the play and suggest complex pretend. In contrast to the parent, older siblings assume a complementary pretend role to the toddler and within that role, direct the play. The toddler is assigned a more passive role in sibling pretend play than in parent-toddler social pretend play. Within the play with siblings the toddler obtains experiences of role enactment but has little experience with negotiating pretend meanings.

On the basis of these studies of toddler pretend play with older partners it was hypothesized that social pretend play in mixed age dyads of toddlers and preschoolers would be more complex than social pretend play between toddlers. Support for the hypothesis of greater complexity of play in mixed age dyads is also provided from studies of social and problem solving behavior in mixed age versus same age dyads. Younger children are potentially able to learn various social and cognitive skills through the observation and imitation of more competent behavior and from interaction

with a more socially skilled partner (Graziano, French, Brownell & Hartup, 1976; Hartup,1983; Lougee,Grueneich & Hartup,1977). Although the majority of the literature on mixed age peer interaction has focused on the behavior of preschool and older children, several recent studies suggest that toddler interaction with preschool partners may also result in more complex interaction. Brownell (1984) found eighteen month old children to use more vocalizations, imitations, and object mediated social actions when playing with two year olds as opposedto age mates. Chalkley (1984) reports toddlers who spent six weeks in a play group with preschoolers used more verbal communicative behaviors than toddlers who were paired with age mates.

Complexity of social pretend play in the present study was defined by the degree of complementary structure in the pretend actions of the participating children. In complementary or cooperative social pretend play the fantasy actions of one child are dependent on the fantasy action of the other, for example if two children are being firefighters one child has the hose and the other child drives the firetruck to the fire. Work by Garvey & Berndt, (1975) and Giffin (1984) suggests elaborated social pretend play between preschool age children consists of shared scripts with assigned cooperative roles. Work by Howes (in press) suggests that within the toddler period, younger children's social pretend play has a contingent structure

while older children's social pretend assumes a complementary structure.

A second purpose of the present study was to compare five year old children's attempts to communicate pretend meanings with same age and younger partners. Several studies report that children accomodate to the perceived social needs of younger peers (Goldman, 1981, Lougee,Greuneich & Hartup,1977; Sach & Gelman,1973) and specifically expect to provide instruction to younger children (French,1984). Therefore it was hypothesized that the five year old children in the present study would use different behaviors to structure social pretend play with age mates and younger children.

Meta-communications about pretend play were of particular interest in this study. Meta communications about play are verbal statements or actions that explain how messages about pretend play should be interpreted.Several recent studies have described the use of meta-communications in preschool and toddler age children (Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984; Garvey & Berndt,1975; Griffin,1984; Howes, in press). Younger children tend to use actions as pretend metaphors (Bretherton,1984; Howes,in press). Preschoolers tend to use verbal rituals to communicate the non-literal nature of the play. In addition to meta-communcative bahaviors the current study also compared the use of attempts to direct play and imitative behavior in

order to provide a replication with a younger sample of studies which find mixed age play to represent asymmetrical interactions (Grazino, French, Brownell & Hartup, 1976)

A quasi-experimental design was used to test these hypothesis. Pairs of acquainted mixed and same age children were asked to play with a new toy which suggested fantasy play. The complexity of the resulting social pretend play and the behaviors used to coomunicate and coordinate pretend were observed.

Methods

Sample

Thirty-two children participated in this research. Sixteen (8 girls) of the children were two year olds (age range= 17 to 34m., mean age= 25.4m., s.d.=1.4m.) and 16 children (8 girls) were five year olds (age range= 48 to 67m., mean age= 60m., s.d.=2.1m.). The children all attended a day care center which enrolled children between the ages of 3 and 67m. and encouraged mixed age peer interaction. The children were heterogeneous with respect to ethnic and socio-economic status but there were no group differences on these demographic variables. All of the children spoke English.

Same and mixed age dyad pairs were randomly selected by the experimenters. All dyads were same sex pairs. No sibling pairs were included in the same dyad. Eight of the children,

four in each age group had siblings who were the age of their mixed age play partner.

Procedure

Each child was observed twice, once with an agemate and once with a mixed age partner. Same age and mixed age play sessions were counterbalanced. Each play session was coded continuously in thirty second intervals for a total of fifteen minutes.

The play sessions were conducted in the day care center in a section equally familiar to all age groups. The Fisher-Price camping set - a 15 piece toy designed to stimulate fantasy play - was placed on a low table and children were asked to play with it. The camping set was a novel toy. It was not available in either the day care center, or according to parental report , in the children's homes.

Measures

Two dimensions of social pretend play were examined: the complexity of the social pretend play engaged in by the dyad, and the social behaviors used by individual children to construct social pretend play.

Complexity of social pretend play

A coding scheme developed by Howes (in press) was used to rate the complexity of social pretend play of the dyad. In order for social pretend play to be rated the children had to be engaged in social interaction with at least a turn

taking structure i.e. the social bids of child A received contingent social responses from child B. Social pretend play was rated as either simple social pretend play or as cooperative social pretend play. In simple social pretend play both children performed pretense actions. Fantasy actions were defined as actions and/or verbalizations which permited the observer to judge that the child was engaged in a nonliteral act e.g. drinking from an empty cup and saying "good milk" (Nicolich,1977). The fantasy actions may have been temporally related, i.e. the action of child A followed the action of child B; or the actions may have involved similar objects but there was no indication of complementary roles. In cooperative social pretend play the fantasy actions and/or verbalizations of both partners indicated that the children had assumed complementary pretend roles, e.g. mother-baby or sister-brother. The roles did not have to be named explicitly but the role had to be clear from the fantasy action, e.g. A feeds B's doll; B makes eating gestures and noises and cries like a baby.

Social behaviors used to construct social pretend play

Meta communications about play Meta communications were coded as either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal meta communications were adapted from work by Giffin (1984) and included verbal messages that established a script for the pretense, made explicit how other verbalizations and behavior should be interpreted, or clarified the

organization of the pretense, the rules that govern pretense, or whether a pretense state existed. Nonverbal meta communications were gestures, eye gazes or object offers that directed fantasy actions to the partner.

Teaching Teaching behaviors were defined as a child giving explicit instructions regarding how to operate the toy. For example telling the other child how to open the trailer or how to attach the boat to the car.

Attempts to direct play Attempts to direct play were defined as any verbal or nonverbal bahavior directed to a partner in order to control or to influence the behavior of the partner. Attempts to direct play included commands, questions, requests, and manipulation of the other child's hand and didnot include teaching the partner how to operate the toy.

Imitation Imitations was defined as the imitation of the fantasy action or verbalization of the other.

Reliability

All of the observations were collected by the second author, a trained graduate student. The observer was trained to a criterion of 90% agreement with the first author prior to data collection. Throughout data collection inter-observer reliability between the two authors was assessed on children not included in the sample following every 8th observation. Cohen's Kappa values for reliability ranged from .85 to .94, median =.90.

Results

Comparisons of the complexity of social pretend play in mixed and same age dyads

The complexity of social pretend play was compared for mixed age and the two same age dyad types (2 year olds and 5 year olds). A multivariate repeated measures analysis

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Insert table 1 about here

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of variance with one repeated factor (same age, mixed age) and two grouping factors (age and sex) and subsequent univariate analysis of variance were used to make these comparisons. Means, standard deviations, F values and associated probability levels for these comparisons are presented in Table 1.

There were significant multivariate effects for the interaction between age composition and age ($F(2,29)=4.04$ $p=.03$) and for the main effect of age ($F(2,29)=4.13, p=.03$). There were no significant effects for sexual compoaition of the dyad. Planned comparisons supported the hypotheses. Same age five year old dyads had more cooperative social pretend play than mixed age dyads. Mixed age dyads had more cooperative social pretend play than same age two year dyads. Mixed age and same age two year old dyads had more simple social pretend play than same age five year old dyads.

Comparison of social behaviors used to construct social pretend play

The social behaviors used to construct social pretend play were compared for children of the two age groups (two and five year olds), for age composition of the dyad (same or mixed), and for sex of the dyad (girl or boy). Multivariate analysis of variance was used to make the comparison. There were two grouping factors (age and sex) and one repeated measure (same or mixed age dyad). There was a significant multivariate interaction between age composition and age ($F(5,24)= 3.42, p=.03$), and a significant main effect for age ($F(5,24)=10.51, p=.01$). There were no significant effects for sexual composition of the dyad. Means, standard deviations, univariate F values, and associated probability levels are presented in table 2.

Insert table 2 about here

Scheffe tests were used to make comparisons between groups. Five year olds in mixed age groups used more verbal meta-communications than five year olds in same age groups. Five year olds in same age groups used more verbal meta-communications than two year olds in same age groups and two year olds in mixed age groups used the least amount of verbal meta-communication. Five year olds in same age and

mixed age dyads used more nonverbal meta-communications than two year olds in same or mixed age dyads.

Five year olds in same age dyads used more teaching behaviors than five year olds in mixed age dyads. Five year olds in same and mixed age dyads more often used teaching behaviors and attempted to direct play than two year olds in same age groups. Two year olds in same age groups more often attempted to direct play than two year olds in mixed age groups. Two year olds in mixed age groups more often imitated the pretense of the partner than any other group.

Discussion

The hypothesis that social pretend play would be more complex in mixed age as opposed to same age toddler dyads was supported by the results of the current study. Two year olds in mixed age dyads engaged in more cooperative social pretend play than two year olds in same age dyads. Simple social pretend play was similar in two year old same age and mixed age dyads. It appears that engaging with an older child permitted the toddler to engage in social pretend play with a complementary role structure. This result is consistent with Dunn and Dale's (1984) observations of sibling social pretend play.

The hypothesis that five year olds would modify the behaviors used to construct social pretend play to accomodate to the perceived needs of their partners was partially suppported by the current study. Five year old's

use of meta-communications about play was greater in the mixed age as opposed to the same age condition, suggesting that they made more verbal efforts to communicate about the nature of the play with a younger partner. However, there were no differences in the five year old's use of nonverbal meta-communication behaviors between the same and mixed age conditions and the five year olds used more teaching behaviors in the same age than in the mixed age conditions.

The current study also replicates previous work which suggests that mixed age peer interaction has an asymmetrical quality (Graziano, French, Brownell & Hartup, 1976). In mixed age dyads preschoolers used more teaching behaviores and made more attempts to direct play than toddlers and toddlers more often imitated preschoolers.

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Table 1

Comparison of social pretend play in mixed and same age dyads/a

	Age composition							
	Same age				Mixed age		F ratios	
	Two		Five					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Age by age comp.	Age comp.
Social Pretend play								
Simple	13.1	6.2	5.9	8.8	12.9	7.1	3.67*	.09
Cooperative	4.1	2.3	20.8	8.4	5.8	1.5	4.61*	8.03**

/a frequencies are tabled

* $p<.05$

** $p<.01$

Table two

Comparison of social behaviors used to construct social pretend play/a

	Age composition									
	Same age				Mixed age				F ratios	
	Two		Five		Two		Five			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Age by age comp.	Age
Social behaviors										
Meta-communication										
verbal	11.9	9.8	42.7	21.1	4.1	7.5	50.5	30.8	5.32*	8.81**
nonverbal	.4	1.0	8.8	19.4	.3	.8	10.8	9.4	.05	4.57*
Attempts to direct	6.5	5.3	9.7	2.6	3.2	1.3	9.0	6.7	5.64*	6.71*
Teach	.4	.2	5.8	1.3	.1	.3	3.1	2.6	3.16*	5.83*
Imitate	.2	.5	.6	1.5	1.8	.9	.4	.2	3.19*	.17

/a frequencies are tabled